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NORWAY

A READING LESSON. II

GEORG THORNE-THOMSEN

And now begins a merry life for the children. Up early in the morning to take the cattle to the best pastures, and then to pick flowers and berries the whole day. For the evening the best part of all is left—to sit around the hearth and listen to fairy-tales. In this way the short summer passes rapidly—altogether too rapidly.

Among the remembrances of a Norwegian boy none are dearer to him than those connected with the saeter. When school closes at the end of June, it is the highest ambition of every schoolboy to visit the mountains. How I used to long for them and look forward to the hour when I could put the books on the shelf and say goodby to the hot, dusty city!

With the knapsack on his shoulder, and with a very little money in his pocket, the Norwegian boy leaves his home and stays away for weeks during the summer. Wherever he goes, everyone is kind to him, and, thanks to Norwegian hospitality, he does not spend more than ten to twenty cents a day. In many places they receive him as a guest and are glad to have him. He has to walk most of the time, the railways being few and the rivers not very navigable. Of course, the wealthy foreigner travels all over the country in the cariol, a typical Norwegian vehicle for one horse. On the steep, narrow mountain-paths these rich people have the mountain-horse to carry them. But the schoolboy can afford no such extravagance. A pair of strong legs, a determination to climb all the peaks nobody else could climb, and fifteen to twenty dollars in his pocket are his whole outfit for a five to six weeks' journey. But he gets on all right. Maybe his feet are sore once in a while; perhaps he does not climb all the peaks that stand in his way; maybe he doesn't travel so very fast; but what he gains by this slow way of travel-

ing is a thorough understanding and appreciation of his country and its people. Traveling on foot gives, more than any other way of traveling, a splendid opportunity of coming into close contact with the peasants and their lives; and the boy coming back from his journey brings with him a strong impression of the beauty of his country and a better knowledge of its people.

But it is not only in summer time that we visit the different parts of our country; the winter also gives us, perhaps, still better opportunities. From their earliest childhood, the Norwegian boy and girl become accustomed to the use of the *ski*—a kind of snowshoe, that, however, bears no resemblance to the Indian snowshoe. When the snow lies several feet deep, covering up every path and road, when the lakes are frozen, and with only a few hours of daylight, we visit the mountains and forests on snowshoes. All the saeters, the pasture houses, are closed, and we may be fifty to sixty miles away from any human dwelling; but on such trips we are generally supplied with reindeer bags, which furnish us shelter for the night. Usually two persons sleep in one bag; and, although surrounded by ice and snow, and at a temperature of twenty to thirty degrees below zero, this bag gives us a warm shelter for the night. Snowshoe-running is the typical national sport in Norway, and is indulged in by young and old, men and women. A Norwegian girl on skis is a pretty sight; health and independence are her main characteristics; and the boys, who on their skis jump ninety to a hundred feet, and lie out in the dark winter night far from home, grow to be men with a healthy mind in a healthy body.

As a young boy, with a knapsack on my shoulders, I climbed the Galdho Peak, the highest peak of Jotenheim, together with some countrymen and an English couple. Tied together with a thick rope and with axes and sticks, we first crossed the immense ice-field that stretches off for miles at the foot of the peak.

Finding our way over the many crevasses, the intense heat reflected from the ice burned our faces. In hot, but perfectly clear, weather we reached the summit, where our guide had built a small hut, after having first carried the timber on his shoulders all the way over the snow-fields. From this little hut we en-

joyed one of the grandest scenes a person can look upon; one of the wildest, at any rate. On all sides of us nothing was to be seen but rock, ice, and snow; in the whole landscape you could discover neither grass nor forests, neither a bending river nor a glittering water-sheet. It was a perfect Arctic scene. All the valleys, the gorges, the fiords, were hidden from our view. The icy tongues licked the mountain-sides, and far west the sunshine sparkled on the Jostedal bræ, the largest snow-field of Europe.

It was among these mountains that the god Thor, in the old days, fought the Jotuns, or the frost giants; it was here that he used his never-failing hammer. But on Christmas Eve Thor is again at the head of the warlike gods. In the furious winter storms they ride through Jotenheim on foaming black horses. The peasants from the surrounding valleys hear the terrible noise and tremble, and woe to him who has forgotten to put the sign of the cross on the doors of his house and barn. He may find his cattle and horses gone, or even he himself may be dragged by one of the valkyries up to Valhal. This ride of the gods on Christmas Eve is known as the *Aasgaardsridt*.

A sail along the northern coast of Norway, with its thousands of islands, is wonderful. The islands assume the most fantastic shapes and give rise to a rich folk lore; every rock and cliff has its story attached to it; islands, miles apart, act as characters in one drama, and whole series of cliffs and rocks are connected in the same story. There is a group of rocky islands called the Seven Sisters; at some distance another island is found known as the Horseman; with a stretch of your imagination you can make out the panting steed and the gigantic figure on his back. The giant was pursuing these seven maidens, so the story goes; but, unable to catch up with them, he lifted a tremendous rock and flung it after them; the stone passed through a large mountain, and the hole it left can still be seen.

Some of these rocks are teeming with life, and millions of birds use them as their roosting-places. At a distance you see only a moving mass, but coming nearer you will find that this mass consists of millions and millions of birds. To possess such

a bird-rock is to be rich, because it yields annually immense quantities of the finest down.

Here, among these islands, the Lofoten Islands, are the most extensive fisheries of Norway. In the coldest part of the winter; people from the surrounding districts, even from regions far south, meet on these islands to attend the winter's fishing. If they fail, it means starvation to thousands; if they turn out well, families may become rich in a few weeks. But terrible storms rage here, and in a single night hundreds of boats may be upset, leaving families all along the coast unprovided for.

Imagine a scene here in midsummer, among these fantastically shaped islands, where the whales are playing and the birds are crying; you might think you had come to a fairyland. At night the light of the sun is very pale, weird, and drowsy, and the sky has every appearance of sunset. The birds seek their nests, the dew falls, all nature seems to go to rest. But this lasts only for a short time; the mellow light passes away, and the whole sky becomes brilliant as at sunrise. The sun rises; shortly afterward there is life everywhere. The birds begin to sing again and go busily to work; the northern summer is so short, and so much has to be accomplished before fall sets in; the young ones must be taught to fly, to be ready to spread their wings and go with their parents far south when the autumn storms begin.

Norway has a long and dark winter, but it has also a warm and beautiful summer. If you have missed the sun through the dark winter months, you enjoy its return so much more. The summer sends a message of its coming through air and water; you feel the summer in the warm breeze from the sea, in the blue sky. The ice loosens on the rivers and comes dancing down from the mountains. In a short time it is green everywhere, right up to the edge of the glacier. The sun seems to feel how cruel it has been in staying away so long, and tries to make up for all the dark winter days. How fast everything grows, and how rapidly the landscape changes! And no wonder; for many a week the sun shines without sinking below the horizon. Instead of a day of twelve hours, there is a day of three months.

Evening comes, but still the gleam of the sun is on the sea and among the mountains.

People up in the northern regions look forward to the return of the sun with the greatest impatience; they watch all the things that predict its coming. They notice with the greatest delight the high, flaming pyramid which it forms at the horizon while still being under it. When, at last, the mountains are burning in its beams, and it appears down in the fiord and valleys, there is then a joy that only those can feel that have missed its sight for nine to ten weeks. The guns from Vardohus, the most northern fort of Norway, are thundering, and the day of the sun's return is celebrated as a holiday. Forgotten are all the dark and dreary hours, and life seems beautiful again. Nobody thinks of sleep, but only of enjoying the short, beautiful summer.

After the last days of July the day grows rapidly shorter, and you see less and less of the sun, till at last it disappears. But although the sun itself cannot be seen, there is a bright glow in the eastern sky every day, which, as winter deepens, becomes dimmer and dimmer, until there are only a couple of hours at noon when you can see to work by daylight. When the weather is stormy, lamps are kept burning all day. However, most people overestimate the darkness of the winters far north. They are not so dark, after all; the stars, the moon, and the reflection from the snow and ice give much light, and, still more, there is the aurora borealis that makes the northern winter nights so beautiful.

From our earliest childhood we are nursed by folklore and mythology. All nature seems alive and speaks to us—the mountains, the lakes, the rivers and the brooks, the deep sea, and the forest.

When St. Olaf attempted to introduce Christianity and built the first churches in Norway, he had a terrible struggle; the old gods were not willing to give up their hold on the people without a battle. So they rose against the king with their hosts of Jotens, dwarfs, and other strange beings. It was for them a hopeless fight; nothing availed against the victorious king; their very efforts to obstruct him were turned into blessings, and their

gigantic strength became an instrument in his hands. Soon the king's work was successfully accomplished; but, as a punishment for their obstinacy, many of the giants were turned into stone, and are now found all over the country as representatives of the old mythology in the fantastically shaped islands and cliffs, waiting for their final judgment. But most of these strange beings are still said to people the mountains and forests. Sometimes you hear the most beautiful music from within the mountains; or you see a castle in a place where you saw nothing before. A large crowd of people is gathered outside it, and music and noise are heard from within. Then you must be careful, or else these beings may get power over you; but if you make the sign of the cross, or say the Lord's Prayer loud enough, it will all vanish in a second, and nothing will be left of all the splendor. If you don't take this precaution, you may be drawn into the mountain where these beings live, and where all is gold and silver.

In the waterfalls the *fossegrim* lives. He plays the violin, and they say that Ole Bull and other famous violinists learned their art from him. Sometimes he plays so beautifully, so enchantingly, that you forget everything, and are tempted to throw yourself into the waterfall. Sometimes the tune is so heavy, so mournful, that you can't help weeping.

In the lakes and the fiords lives the *nökke*—a being who every year wants the sacrifice of a man or a woman; so that in the lake or fiord where there is a *nökke* a human being is lost every year.

The principal being in the Norwegian folklore is the so-called *huldre*. The *huldre* lives on the mountains and in the valleys. She has all the beauty and splendor of the Norwegian scenery; but she has also its deep melancholy, as revealed in her singing and violin-playing, and to which you cannot listen without tears; but by her beauty and love she weakens and entices people's minds.

In many hills around the country old kings have been buried with their goods and treasures. I have myself helped to dig up such a hill, in which we found old weapons, implements, bones, etc. In many a place immense treasure is said to be concealed,

and the common belief is that a light is burning over it during the night. If you dig three successive Thursday eves, without uttering a word while digging, the treasure is yours.

A very familiar figure in Norwegian fairy-tales is the devil. As he appears in the Scandinavian folklore with horsehoof, plug hat, and swallowtail coat, he is rather a stupid fellow. All kinds of tricks are played on him, and numerous are the scrapes he gets into. The old Norse mythology did not know of any devil. Loke, however wicked, was no devil by any means. When Christianity was introduced, many features of the old belief were transferred to the new religion, and as they had to have a devil, Loke was favored with the position.

The hero in our fairy-tales is Askeladden, or "the cinder-lad." While the others are working he seems to be idle. He is laughed at and looked upon with contempt by his brothers and everybody else. He takes no active part in what goes on around him, but spends his time by the fireside digging in the ashes. But great powers and abilities are dormant in him. He is quietly observing, and knows that his day will come; and until then he is contented to wait. Then, when the country is in danger; when everybody else has tried and failed; when a great deed is to be done, and the whole nation is waiting for a man, then Askeladden appears, no longer in rags, but in all the splendor and confidence of a hero. Then, when the deed is done, when the king and his people are rejoicing, and the princess and half the kingdom are promised to the hero, Askeladden, again in his rags, returns quietly to his fireside. He knows the task has been done, and that appreciation will come, however late. Much of the Norwegian's way of thinking and acting is mirrored, and has found expression, in this hero of the fairy story. He is the embodiment of certain features in the character of the Norwegian, as much to his disadvantage as to his advantage.

The Norwegian loves the deed, and his whole life and labor are back of his love. It is generally agreed that the dwellers in mountainous countries are much less fit for the constant, monotonous labor, as found in factories, than the people in the lowlands

The life of the Norwegian is divided between indolent rest and fight for a scanty support. At one moment the sun shines brightly, the sea is unruffled and the sky without clouds; in fact, nature seems to smile on him. At another moment, nature in all her fury is arrayed in fierce battle against him; she no longer gives out of her abundance like a kind mother, but he has to put in his life for what he can get. At such times he is the man of deed, with his whole personality concentrated and expressed in a single act.

Along the western coast this life in calm and storm is more apparent than anywhere else. The extremes in nature have their equivalent in the character of the people. Look at the peasant ashore—a picture of indolence and inactivity. See him in his boat—all energy, daring, but at the same time self-possessed; he seems not like the same man. This is what makes up his real life—these flashes, these gleams of danger and action—while the rest of his life is only an intermission, an indolent waiting for the next deed.

The sailor's life is exceedingly attractive to the Norwegian, because it presents the unexpected, that living for the moment for which his nature has so great a craving. For this reason the commercial fleet of Norway stands fourth in rank among the nations; for this reason Norwegian sailors are met in every corner of the world. But these sailors would do only medium work in the large cotton factories. It is against our inmost soul to give our lives piecemeal. It is when labor is elevated to a fight, when work becomes a deed into which he can put all mental and physical powers, that you can count on the Norwegian. He may be slow to arouse, but when aroused, his whole being is put in for the issue. The history of the Norwegian people, from the vikings down to modern times, tells of the same tendency—this love of the deed. Their heroes have been those men who, in times of national calamity, put everything at stake to conquer all or lose all.

The Norwegian people are not a money-saving nation. What is gained in the fierce struggle is easily squandered in the quiet intervals. It is difficult for the Norwegian to get down to the

business and routine of life. From childhood we are kept away from it by the enchanted world in which we lead a second life—a world of princes and princesses, of giants and heroes; a world in which wonderful feats are performed, where nothing is impossible for him who dares. Then in after years we measure life by this world full of impossibilities, but the measure seldom fits. When, instead of heroes and giants, in actual life we find mostly dwarfs and cripples, we are disappointed. Our eyesight has to be readjusted, and some never can get over this readjustment.

One will readily understand that people living in deep valleys, under the dark shadows of mountains, year after year, seeing only the black rock, wildly roaring ice-rivers, or blue glaciers; who are always being threatened by avalanches of stone and ice, must acquire peculiar traits of character. People who have their hopes out on a furious sea; who, in the dark winter, at every moment must risk their lives for a scanty support, must necessarily lead a peculiar mental life. This is the case on the west coast of Norway. Under such circumstances man feels himself powerless, although this feeling has a different influence on different individuals. Some give up the fight immediately and sink helplessly down to lead a life of misery. Others become cold and severe by the daily struggle, and believe firmly that life is ruled by an unchangeable fate, called in Norwegian *lag-nad*, against which there is no use fighting. The latter are strong but stern men and women, who have neither hope nor illusion. They meet the danger with cold tranquility, and avoid all that makes life bright and beautiful. Their expression is rigid and immovable, and they think it the greatest shame for a man to show any outward sign of emotion. They resemble the heroes about whom the sagas tell, who, in exciting situations, grew ashy pale like withered grass, big drops of sweat bursting from their brows.

The national types, as you find them today, have had centuries in which to develop their own peculiar characteristics. Within its narrow limits, every fiord, every valley, has brought forth its own type. Separated by the vast mountain wastes, they developed dialects hardly comprehensible to people outside the

valley. The national dress and customs of one valley are very much different from those in the adjacent valley. It is an interesting fact to notice that, owing to the structure—that is, the parallelism—of the valleys and the rivers, one peculiar type of people can be more or less recognized along the entire length of the valley. Although separated by hundreds of miles, the people in the upper part of the valley and those living in the lower part of the same valley are therefore more closely related than people only separated by a few miles of mountain waste, but living in different valleys.

The Norwegian rivers, however considerable, are joined by few tributaries and receive their drainage almost entirely from the narrow valleys through which they flow. It is the same with the national life pulsating in many valleys; it has for centuries flowed in the same narrow channels. No tributaries of outside influence have come in to blend their waters and add strength and freshness. On account of this seclusion, life in many a valley used to be stagnant, and a visit there would put you back centuries in civilization. In some corners you might find a superstition reminding you of mediaeval times, and a roughness in habits and ways of living that would be shocking to an outsider; a wildness and a lawlessness that would have fitted the times of the viking.

Drinking and fighting used to be the only worthy entertainment for men. At parties, and at their weddings and funerals, fighting with the knife was a fixed part of the programme. Such parties used to last for several days, and started very tamely; but as the strong home-brewed beer commenced to act on the men, and as the rhythmic dances made the blood flow like fire in their veins, the spirits of their ancestors would wake up in them. Wilder and wilder the dance would be; higher and higher the girls would be lifted by the strong arms; oftener and oftener the drinking horns would be filled and emptied. And then, when the eyes gleamed, and the jumps and turns became more and more daring and violent, one quarrelsome word would be enough to make old jealousy and hatred fresh again, and start a fight. A circle would be formed on the floor around the fighters,

and then a dance would begin which, in most cases, proved fatal to one of the participants. In those days a wedding very often ended in a funeral.

This division of the country into deep, narrow valleys has had a marked influence on the history of the people. In ancient times, up to the year 800 A.D., the country was divided into numerous kingdoms, every valley and fiord having its own chieftan or king. Under Harold Fairhair the whole country became united, but only after a terrible struggle in which each valley and fiord had to be conquered separately. All through history a certain lack of unity has been apparent, the difficult task for the sovereign being to have these different clans work together as one unit, as one people.

It is not strange to find a deep longing in a people that lives in narrow valleys, with only a narrow strip of heaven above, shut out from the rest of the world. With the deep fiord below and the high mountains above, your home becomes a prison. Your longings and yearnings are thrown back by the rocky walls. This longing found an expression, in the olden time, in the life of the viking. His home on the bank of the fiord was to him but a place to which he could bring his prey; the wide sea was his real home. This longing for the outside world still survives in the Norwegian. Wherever you go in Norway, you will never be far from the sea; it hugs the thousands of islands around the coast and sends its arms into the very heart of the country. However much you are shut in, there is one exit—the fiord. And this sea—how it tempts! Sailors come home and tell the eagerly listening children wonderful tales about far-off countries where the sky is wide and blue, where there is always summer, nothing but sunshine and warmth, where palms sway in the soft breezes, and where life is easy. With every vessel that spreads its sail to leave the little harbor the boy sends a longing thought; every vessel that anchors brings him greetings from the world. To thousands of Norwegian boys this longing becomes too strong, and then they leave their homes often at the early age of thirteen or fourteen. This wild longing makes them give up home, school, and fireside; drowns all other interests.

But high above the narrow fiords and valleys there is another sea—the wide plateau. This sea has also its billows, with crests of ice and snow. And this sea had all my longings and thoughts.

The picture of Norway and its people is one of great contrasts, of high light and deep shade. The short, brilliant summer is succeeded by a long, dark winter. The open, fertile valleys of the fiords of the eastern part of Norway have their counterpart in the west, with rocky, gloomy chasms into which the sun's rays hardly ever penetrate. In the people the most liberal and progressive spirit is found side by side with the greatest narrowness. An exuberant joy of life is overshadowed by the deepest melancholy. In the mountain-fiddle this melancholy vibrates as a deep, weird undertone that never for a moment ceases, even when the merriest music is played.

The gloomiest fiord has, however, its gleams of light, and the darkest rock its spray from the waterfalls. With all the wildness and warfare of the sages there are woven into the dark pictures golden threads of friendship and love. Among the warlike gods of the Norsemen, with Odin and Thor at their head, Baldur lives fair and beautiful forever.